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<Book Review>

Yen Vu

Trần Đình Trụ. *Ship of Fate: Memoir of a Vietnamese Repatriate.*

Translated by Bac Hoai Tran and Jana K. Lipman. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press in association with UCLA Asian American Studies Center, 2017.

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industry.

In sum, this lively and ambitious monograph is solidly researched and pushes the envelope on how we might define and study an economic zone by successfully sailing around national boundaries. However, more could have been done to interrogate theoretical paradigms in the writing of transnational as well as indigenous history. A few suggestive analytical frameworks such as cosmopolitanism in indenture are introduced at the beginning of the book but remain regrettably underdeveloped in the content chapters. Consequently, it is a volume that piques further curiosity rather than forges new ground. Still, it is a valuable addition to a growing literature on Eastern Indonesia and revisionist Australian history. It is highly recommended for scholars of migration and those with an interest in Indonesia-Australia relations.

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Ship of Fate: Memoir of a Vietnamese Repatriate

TRẦN ĐÌNH TRỤ. Translated by BAC HOAI TRAN and JANA K. LIPMAN

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press in association with UCLA Asian American Studies Center, 2017.

Among the first words to describe Trần Đình Trụ's *Ship of Fate: Memoir of a Vietnamese Repatriate* is “resilience,” for his South Vietnamese perspective admirably intimates the many trials that test—without budging—his one goal of reuniting with his family. The reader sympathizes with Trần Đình Trụ very early in his memoir, because despite long days away at sea at the beginning of his career, he always patiently looked toward going home. And yet when Jana Lipman writes in the introduction that this memoir has “survived multiple iterations and reflects more than one moment in time” (p. 4), she highlights the possibility of the memoir, as a written work of memories, to also be resilient in the face of its own tests of time. Indeed, it would not be the first time the

author writes about his life, since for many months during his first year in the reeducation camp self-examinations were a daily exercise. And this being a translation, we are duly reminded of the time and the challenges that go into the work. This latest iteration, contributed by Lipman with Bac Hoai Tran, is a crucial one, for they have managed to render the resilience of both story and storyteller relevant and accessible to a wider audience.

Based on my knowledge of the Vietnamese language, one of the language's more beautiful but also difficult aspects to grasp is the extensive use of implied and figurative speech. Meanings that are inherent in simple, everyday words—pronouns, for example—can make the language elusive and even arduous to translate. Where Lipman has mentioned Trần Đình Trự less generously with details, such as in his relationship with his wife and in encounters with his family, I genuinely wondered what other clues, possible those untranslatable, I might have been able to parse out from the Vietnamese version. Perhaps subtle implications such as those behind personal pronouns might more satisfyingly reveal the intimacies beyond the English “you” or “me.” This curiosity is one indulged by a speaker of Vietnamese but does not speak to the quality of the translation. Eloquent and intricate, the translation brings non-Vietnamese speakers and readers a concise narrative that respects the palpability of Trần Đình Trự's struggles put in writing. Able word choices manage to evoke the same specific sentiments as the Vietnamese equivalent: the recurring “rest easy” is very much the reassuring “yên tâm,” and the connotation of a gentle wife is immediately that of “người vợ hiền.” In both the original and the translation, however, accessibility remains at stake. In making a text more widely accessible with an English translation, the risk of filing away nuances that are exclusive to the language is inherent. But as important as the accuracy of words or nuances are, the translators also seem to acknowledge that certain sentiments do not translate easily into words for the writer. In other words, sometimes the parts that remain untranslatable are beyond the linguistic problem of going from one language to another.

Specialists and non-specialists alike will find this translation into English enriching and useful; the historical elements along with the pull of betrayal, loss, and suspense make the memoir an informative and intriguing read. One learns another angle of the Vietnamese refugee experience and reevaluates the generalized trajectory of refugees escaping Communism and evacuating a “lost nation.” Trần Đình Trự's own reflections also shed light on the ambivalent Vietnamese perception of the American presence in Vietnam, for not everyone who lived in the South identified as pro-American or anticommunist or both. While officers such as Trự were grateful for the resources and training provided by the United States, they were also well aware of the latter's power and ability to withdraw aid at any point. Trự's narrative, along with its translation, contribute an important perspective that, while being indeed a Southern Vietnamese perspective, draws upon the complexities of political positions and sides rather than advocates them.

The author begins with his childhood, which does more than set up the story chronologically, for it also provides the reader with crucial historical context as well as the author's own develop-

ment of values. We learn of his travels to other countries as well as the privileges and liberties reaped by Southern Vietnamese officers in the late 1960s at the pinnacle of US intervention. Writing about the days leading up to April 30, 1975, when many political leaders and civilians were pining to leave the country, Tru openly questions one's sense of duty to the country. While the United States has always been associated with the weight of abandoning what was started in Vietnam, Tru directly calls out the responsibility of the South Vietnamese officers who were trained to defend their country. What purpose did any US intervention serve if these officers did not stay to utilize the tools that were given to them? On the one hand, this critical perspective prompts us to reconsider how the idea of patriotism can change when one feels defeat or loss for one's country. It is understandable that people should leave, for how can they feel patriotic or even connected to their country when everything recognized as such is removed, replaced, or destroyed? Yet on the other hand, Tru very much resists the idea that Vietnam depended on the United States, without skills of its own, because such reliance also relinquishes the effort and responsibility of nation building solely to the Americans. It is a stark reminder of the different ways "nation" can be understood at the time of nation building. For Tru, who was evacuated to Guam, his strong desire for repatriation speaks to *his* understanding, which is that while the leaders of his nation were replaced, his land and country still remain.

The struggle for repatriation occupies much of the narrative, which focuses on the author's time as a refugee on Guam during the latter half of 1975. The memoir thus provides important details regarding the refugee population on Guam, the divisions within the refugee community, and the bureaucratic obstacles dealing with the UNHCR, the United States, and the Vietnamese government. The horror of the reeducation camps is also presented, but the passing of the years in these camps is reflected in the length of the section: a single chapter, where years of a mundane but uneasy life are conflated without precise indications of time. In this sense, the memoir is more informative than it is lamenting; where Tru dwells are where facts can be recalled more objectively. In fact, the gratuitous passages about protests and shady characters seem to overpopulate his retelling of events and unfortunately do not compensate for the brevity of the already few intimate moments.

Lipman's introduction very deliberately prepares the reader for Tru's matter-of-fact, simple, and reserved tone throughout the memoir. Her introduction convincingly defends Tru's overall style in order to point to an important quality of the memoir for the attentive reader. Often, the instances in which language seems to be missing reflect the difficult nature of instances being retold and revisited. In more superficial ways, this tone does seem to glide over the suffering and the pain we can sense the author experienced. But the "strained, stilted passages" (p. 18) that describe his reunion with his family for the first time after six years correspond to the guarded and even insular nature of memories. While the idea of a memoir seems to promise truth and transparency in its accounts, the way memories are actually inscribed in our minds is not straightforward.

Whether it is an experience of trauma, trial, relief, or even joy, the memory or forgetting of these experiences will occur differently. An event is not simply stored as a memory, and a memory is not simply reiterated as a memoir. Tru testifies in his own words where he stands in the process of writing the memoir and retelling his story—"we each had our own sorrow"—or again later when leaving the ship *Việt Nam Thương Tin*, "our memories remain locked in our own minds" (p. 164). While these statements follow particular events in his story, they reflect a consistent adherence to the privacy, specificity, and intangibility of an individual's sorrow and memory of it. In a way, it is similar to the untranslatable, that which slips through words, from one language to another, from one interlocutor to another, that which, for what it is worth, should be left intact.

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Writing the South Seas: Imagining the Nanyang in Chinese and Southeast Asian Postcolonial Literature

BRIAN BERNARDS

Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2015.

Wrought from Water: "Nanyang" as Transoceanic Imaginary of the South Seas

This book is one of expanse. Of waterways, currents, borders shifting over time with the sheer influx of people, the aspirations that propelled their journeys, settlements evolving into communities and cultures, the slow, hesitant returns to places of origin, the fertile rain forests not only of their imaginations but of an entire ecological system—all these serve as the scaffold to the recent book by Brian Bernards, *Writing the South Seas: Imagining the Nanyang in Chinese and Southeast Asian Postcolonial Literature*.

Writing the South Seas is not only a remarkable inventory of the discursive productions articulating the Nanyang as a literary trope but inescapably a work on travel theory which resonates with recent retrievals of travel writings under a new critical lens. For a long time, travelogues were relegated to the category of "subliterary." They were adjudged mediocre for not being on a par with so-called serious literature. Their style and intent cut across disciplinary fields that defied easy categorization into conventional genres. But it is basically this discursive ambivalence that renders these narratives a fertile source of sociocultural extrapolations. Orientalism, for instance, as it is invoked in this book underlies a production of knowledge of the South Seas as an imagined geography by imperial China. Such a construct was circulated by earlier explorers and perpetuated through various time periods.